

A Glance
at the
Lewis and Clark
Expedition



By
Grace Flandrau

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Captain Meriwether Lewis

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To Thomas Jefferson, more than to any one factor in our national development, is due the creation of an empire, reaching from coast to coast, out of a handful of states stretching along the Atlantic seaboard, and here and there by territorial possessions across the Alleghanies to the Mississippi. In theory he was fanatically the opponent of a great national sovereignty, abhorred those things which are the bulwarks of empire—armies, navies, cities, and strong centralized power. His political philosophy aspired to a rural world swarming with schools, farms and agricultural democrats, who, meeting on a basis of equality, should make the laws by which they governed themselves.

In practice he was our first imperialist.

When the revolution had scarcely been won, before he became President, before the frontiersmen had fought and hewn their way to the Mississippi, Jefferson's purpose reached far beyond this river—across the Spanish-owned Louisiana, over the fabled mountains and along the legendary rivers of the far northwest, to the Pacific Coast.

His hope was not that all this vast expanse should become one American state, but that it should not be European; that it should be a group of small democracies, a kind of pan-America, free forever from the European traditions of king, church, and class. Here, in fact, was the real beginning of the Monroe Doctrine.

Jefferson was, moreover, as much scientist as social philosopher. He felt the keenest interest in acquiring knowledge of the primitive inhabitants, animal and vegetable life, topographical and geological features of this unknown world. And he was politician as well.

As early as 1783, while a member of the infant Congress of the Confederation, he heard that the British government was planning an expedition of discovery and exploration to the northwest coast of America. He wrote at once to George Rogers

Clark of revolutionary fame, urging that he undertake such a journey and thus establish a prior claim to these regions.

In 1785 while Minister to France, a rumor that the French government entertained a similar project again alarmed his watchfulness and he interested the explorer John Ledyard in undertaking a journey through Russia and Siberia, across the Pacific, to the northwest coast and thence eastward down the Missouri River to the United States. Later he is found engaging the Philosophic Society of Boston in a project to send a French botanist André Michaux on a tour through this territory.

None of these plans materialized, but Jefferson's preoccupation with the future of the continent as a whole—a preoccupation in which he stood at that time alone—was unceasing. When, in 1801, he became President it was possible for him to accomplish the exploration of that country which he had so long attempted to bring about.

In the meantime the question of free use of the Mississippi for American craft became a burning one. Five months after Jefferson came into office, Livingstone was sent to France to buy the island of New Orleans commanding the mouth of the river, and the Floridas from Bonaparte who had recently caused the recession of Louisiana by Spain to France. Monroe joined Livingstone in Paris, in April 1803, and shortly afterwards Napoleon tossed the whole of Louisiana instead of the small strip they had been sent to buy, into the laps of the astonished emissaries. That the possession of Louisiana was fortuitous and not planned by Jefferson has nothing to do with his consistent policy as regarded the future of the far west and northwest.

Before the purchase of Louisiana his plans for a considerable expedition to traverse the entire region were well in hand; and when Captains Lewis and Clark appeared in the streets of the little Spanish-French village of St. Louis in December 1803 they came less as scientific explorers than as the direct expression of a philosophic and political ideal.

The Lewis and Clark expedition as nearly reached perfection both in planning and execution as is possible for a merely human effort. The project, as we have seen, had been developing and ripening in Jefferson's mind many years, so that the voluminous and exact instructions he drew up for the conduct of the tour were amazingly thorough and competent; and the men

he chose to lead the party and those in turn chosen by the leaders, were in the highest degree devoted, capable, and courageous.

The Leaders

Captain Meriwether Lewis was a Virginian of distinguished colonial ancestry and was born in 1774 on a farm near Charlottesville. He had several years of formal schooling but from farm and nearby forest he obtained a still more valuable education.

At eighteen he served with the militia in the so-called Whiskey Rebellion and later was made first lieutenant and then captain of the regular army. When Jefferson became president he made Lewis whom he had known from boyhood his private secretary and two years later appointed him to the leadership of the western exploration.

In writing of him there is no praise too high for Jefferson to lavish upon his young subordinate. He especially commends his honesty, courage, and firmness; his powers of exact observation; his knowledge of woodcraft; of Indians and their ways, and of the animal and vegetable life of the forest.

It was Lewis' wish to have a companion of equal rank associated with himself. Jefferson willingly acquiesced. Nothing could be more important than that the choice of such a partner should fall upon a man thoroughly qualified for the delicate and arduous task.

Lewis unhesitatingly sent to a Kentucky farm for a young officer, William C. Clark, then retired, under whom he had served.

Clark was ninth of a family of ten children—a younger brother of General George Rogers Clark.

Although William Clark had retired a captain it was necessary to obtain a new commission for this command. The rank of Captain of "Indioneers" [Engineers] as Clark, in his astonishing orthography spells it, was accordingly applied for. He was made however only a second lieutenant of artillery, but Lewis was scrupulous in according him strict equality of command.

The party consisted of twenty-nine members—the two officers, nine young Kentuckians, fourteen soldiers of the regular army, two French boatmen, an interpreter, and a negro servant of Captain Clark named York. They reached St. Louis in December

of 1803 and spent the winter months in camp at the confluence of Wood River with the Mississippi opposite the mouth of the Missouri. The time was passed in drilling the men, instructing them in the duties the varied nature of the enterprise would entail upon them, and other preparations.

Nature of the Undertaking

Although the morale and spirits of the party were of the best, even the humblest members were impressed with the seriousness and importance of their enterprise and aware of the dangers which would attend it.

A journey of thousands of miles lay before them through an unknown and unmapped country. A few French and Spanish traders had straggled up the Missouri as far as the Mandan villages which parties of British fur traders, descending from the north, occasionally visited; one French exploring expedition, that of the La Verendrye sons, had made an unmarked journey overland to the Black Hills or an easterly spur of the Rocky Mountains. That was all. Beyond these villages the Lewis and Clark party must lay its course with no guide except instinct and common sense. They were to ascend the Missouri as far as seemed wise—it was vaguely supposed to rise in central California; find a practicable pass across mountains indefinitely known to exist, and manage somehow to connect on the western slope with a tributary of the Columbia—an unexplored river whose mouth had been discovered by an American, Captain Gray, in 1792. They were to make topographical surveys, take astronomical and meteorological observations; examine and report on the plants, animals, and minerals of the regions traversed; make an especial study of the waterways as avenues of future transportation and of the contour of the land with a view to future trading posts and fortifications. Particularly, they were to confer with the various tribes of Indians, assure them of the benevolent interest felt for them by their great father in Washington and prepare the way for future negotiations; try to persuade them to more peaceful relations among themselves; ascertain their numbers, tribal affiliations, agricultural and other pursuits and condition in general. Indeed the number of duties and obligations imposed upon these dauntless adventurers would seem preposterous were it not for the fact that they were actually and to the smallest detail carried out!

The party was increased before its departure by sixteen new members. These—a corporal, six soldiers and nine boatmen—were to accompany the main body only as far as the Mandan villages, 1,600 miles above St. Louis.

The Journey Begins

At last, on a May morning in 1804, the square sail of the keel boat was raised, the oars of the two pirogues manned and the party set out on their great adventure. They carried with them in carefully packed bales the necessities of life and trade—food, clothing, guns, ammunition, and articles for barter with the Indians. Horses for the use of the hunters were led along the shore. On the 25th of May, a significant entry in one of the journals states that on this day the "last establishment of whites on the Missouri" was passed.

For five months the small flotilla toiled against the rapid current of the shifting, snag-filled river. There were many delays; the boats were often in need of repairs; the hunters went out after meat; observations were taken; Indian conferences held as directed, when the savages were informed that America not Spain now ruled along the Missouri and good advice as laid down by Mr. Jefferson earnestly offered by the young leaders. The Indians were not only to make peace at once among themselves or let the Great Father in Washington decide their disputes, but they were to prepare themselves to fit into a new order of things.

Good advice certainly, but why the savages should have been expected to act upon the gratuitous admonitions constantly thrust upon them in the early days, much less be grateful for them, or believe the promises made them which so frequently remained unfulfilled, I have never been able to see. Usually, of course they didn't.

With the Indians of the lower Missouri little difficulty was expected or experienced but the temper of the powerful Sioux was known to be uncertain. A French trader, Peter Dorion, who had married and lived among this people many years, was met descending the river and induced to turn back and accompany the expedition as interpreter. Several bands of Sioux were encountered and the meetings passed without serious difficulty.

The one casualty of the expedition occurred during this part of the trip. Sergeant Floyd was taken ill on August 19th and

died the following day. He was buried with the honors of war a mile below the river which still bears his name and his grave marked, Clark writes, by a "seeder" post. The Great Northern Railway follows the valley of this river into the present Sioux City. The citizens, including the railroads, with state and federal aid, have erected a monument here to Sergeant Floyd on a bluff overlooking the Missouri.

One of the only two instances of insubordination which occurred during the whole journey also took place at this time. The culprit was punished and dismissed but we find Lewis in his report of the expedition generously expatiating on the otherwise good conduct and character of the man and regretting that this one misdeed could not have been overlooked.

On the 26th of October they reached the first village of the Mandans—that mild, industrious and vanished people whose domed, mud houses, like the work of great burrowing animals, rose in low irregular clusters from the banks above the Missouri.

Indians lined the river and crowded the house-tops to witness the arrival of this imposing flotilla, the most considerable group of white men they had ever seen; or, charmed and terrified by the black skin and kinky hair of the negro York, followed at a prudent distance this wholly unexpected and doubtless super-human apparition.

The Winter Camp

Several Frenchmen were found here and a Scotch fur trader belonging to The Northwest Company. Minnetarees came down in large numbers from their villages further up the river, and later bands of Knisteneaux [Crees] and Assinniboines paid a visit to the Mandans.

It had been decided to winter at this place; a number of huts were accordingly built and called Fort Mandan.

It is now that the gentle figure of the Bird Woman, Sacajawea, appears, whose quiet courage and devotion have touched with a peculiar grace the subsequent adventures of the party.

She was a Shoshone and had, with another young woman, been captured from her people by the Minnetarees. She was sold to Chaboneau, one of the Frenchmen found at these villages, who later married her. Chaboneau was to accompany the expedition as interpreter, taking his wife and baby with him.

The captains devoted the winter to ethnological observations and to the compilation of voluminous reports. In the spring other Canadian traders arrived. The Northwest Company regarded with extreme disfavor the significant arrival of an American expedition in these regions where they had enjoyed a monopoly of the Indian trade. Hoping to impede the western advance of the party they incited Chaboneau to make exorbitant demands. These were of course refused, but before the party set out the fellow repented his attitude and, together with his wife and young child, was permitted to undertake the journey.

In March, 1805, canoes were built for the further ascent of the river. Cottonwood was the only timber available. It was not fit for the purpose and was the source of much future difficulty, the soft fibrous planks being constantly twisted and crushed in the rough waters of the upper Missouri.

The party now separated; those who were to return to St. Louis embarked carrying with them despatches, reports, and maps prepared by Lewis and Clark, and scientific specimens—"A variety of articles for the President" writes one of the leaders, including stuffed animals, skeletons, horns of mountain sheep, elk and deer; peltries of various kinds; dried plants, Indian curios; tobacco seed; an ear of Mandan corn; a box of insects, and a "burrowing squirrel, a prairie hen and four magpies, all alive."

It is not stated that the latter were still alive when and if they reached the White House. We can easily imagine with what passionate interest its learned occupant examined these first fruits of his longfelt scientific curiosity as to the remote and virgin world of the upper Missouri.

The Indians among whom the party passed the winter did not fail to respond to the scrupulous fairness and courtesy which it was the definite policy of the expedition to extend to the savages and gave their friendship and what help they could to the explorers.

Before the latter set out they received a visit from the great chief of the Minnetarees, Le Borgne, an interesting old monster, murderer, thief and drunkard, the wickedest Indian on the Missouri. He came to find out for himself whether the black man York of whom he heard were really black and not as he believed, merely a painted white man. When his doubts were set at rest he evinced the wonder and gratification generally felt by the Indians at looking upon so fabulous a creature.

April 7, 1805, was the day set for departure. The green cottonwood canoes laden with baggage waited along the shore of the muddy, turbulent river whose unknown course was to lead the party westward.

In his journal for that day Captain Lewis expresses the emotion he experienced at what seemed to him the real beginning of his dangerous venture:

"This little fleet altho' not quite so respectable as those of Columbus or Capt. Cook, were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those deservedly famed adventurers ever beheld theirs; and I dare say with quite as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. we were now about to penetrate a country at least 2,000 miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden . . . and these little vessells contained every article by which we were to expect to subsist or defend ourselves. however, . . . entertaining as I do the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of departure as among the most happy of my life."

The Journey Resumed

After passing the Minnetaree (Hidatsa) villages some miles above Fort Mandan the party saw no more Indians for many months. The Assiniboines of whom they had heard bad reports were hunting farther north on the Assiniboine River. The plains were given over to buffalo, deer, wolves, and fleet bands of antelope that passed like flying clouds before the hunters; ferocious grizzlies infested the willow thickets; white bear were seen; wild fowl of all kinds passed above them in long-throated flight; creeks and backwaters swarmed with beaver.

On April 26 the party approached the mouth of the Yellowstone. The rivers flowed to their confluence between banks shaded with cottonwood, elm and ash; willows, tall rose bushes and wild berries grew thick on the lowlands and everywhere game was seen pasturing on the rolling plains that stretched away to the horizon.

Lewis pronounced this an excellent situation for a future trading house and his recognition of the importance of the site has proved to be prophetic of even more important development. Not only did Fort Union, the central frontier outpost of the Upper Missouri, stand here for forty years, but the confluence of these great rivers which suggested the location of this trading post to Lewis, later indicated the natural boundary point between Dakota and Montana; not far from here the military post



Marias River

Reprinted from Stevens
Northwest Explorations
and surveys 1853-55

of Buford was built later, while a few miles farther east the city of Williston has grown to importance and prosperity.

Westward from Williston, a traveller on the Great Northern Railway follows approximately the route taken by Lewis and Clark for 600 miles to Butte, one of the southern termini of the railroad in Montana. Whenever the Missouri River is sighted along that course, there, over a century ago, the small flotilla might have been seen, the men struggling against the rapid current, hunting along shore, cooking their elk and buffalo meat over the camp-fire or bivouaced for the night among the willow thickets. Four months of weary effort it took them, a journey now accomplished in twenty hours!

A month after leaving the mouth of the Yellowstone the shadowy outline of distant mountains appeared on the western horizon. Captain Lewis again experienced a throb of exultation at this further unfolding of his adventure and a sense too of the terrible difficulties this cloud-like barrier would oppose to his onward march. But he "held it a crime to anticipate evils."

Indeed the immediate evils might well have occupied all his attention. The sluggish brown Missouri had become a clear, tumultuous stream flowing between walls of rock. For many weary days the men fought their way up the river, towing the canoes over rapids, often immersed in water to their armpits, their

moccasins cut and their feet wounded by the sharp stones. Incessant repairs had to be made on the flimsy craft; tow lines broke and once the boat carrying their indispensable instruments for taking observations was almost lost. Through it all the courage and good nature of the men never flagged.

On June 2 they reached a place where the river forked and they were uncertain as to which was the main channel. Nothing is more characteristic of the two men and their conduct of the whole expedition than the care with which they studied this important question, and the exactness of their deductions. The clearness of the water, speed of the current, topography of the country and reports previously obtained from Indians were duly considered. Captain Lewis ascended the northern branch and soon felt convinced that it was the tributary and not the Missouri he was following. He named it Maria's river in honor of Miss Maria Wood, although, he remarks in terms of true southern gallantry, "the hue of the waters of this turbulent and troubled stream but illy comport with the pure celestial virtues of that lovely fair one."

Captain Clark meanwhile reconnoitered the south fork for a short distance. When the leaders returned to their camp at the junction of the two rivers, both were agreed that the south branch was the Missouri, although the men of the party were unanimously convinced that Maria's river was the main stream.

The conclusion reached by Captains Lewis and Clark was, like most of their careful decisions, correct. Had they however been mistaken and ascended Maria's river they might have obtained a far more favorable crossing of the mountains by what is now known as Marias Pass and an easier way from there to the Columbia than by the route taken. But they chose to proceed by the Missouri, a way illumined at least by the vague light of rumor, while away from that stream all was profound darkness.

From this time the leaders often separated, one to explore in advance, one to follow with the baggage. On July 13, 1805, Captain Lewis reached the Great Falls of the Missouri and his pen is inspired to lyric flights by the truly magnificent spectacle. On the 25th, the three forks of the river were reached and named Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin. After a careful reconnaissance it was decided to follow the most westerly—the Jefferson.

It now became a matter of the greatest necessity to find Indians who might guide them to the best passage through the

mountains. Game was already scarce and would, they knew, become still more so in the country they were about to penetrate. Along the west loomed the ominous mass of the great mountains, their broad slopes cloaked with pine, or bare and torn by ancient cataclysm into deep fissures of gashed, grey rock; their lofty peaks, streaked with snow, towered above the clouds.

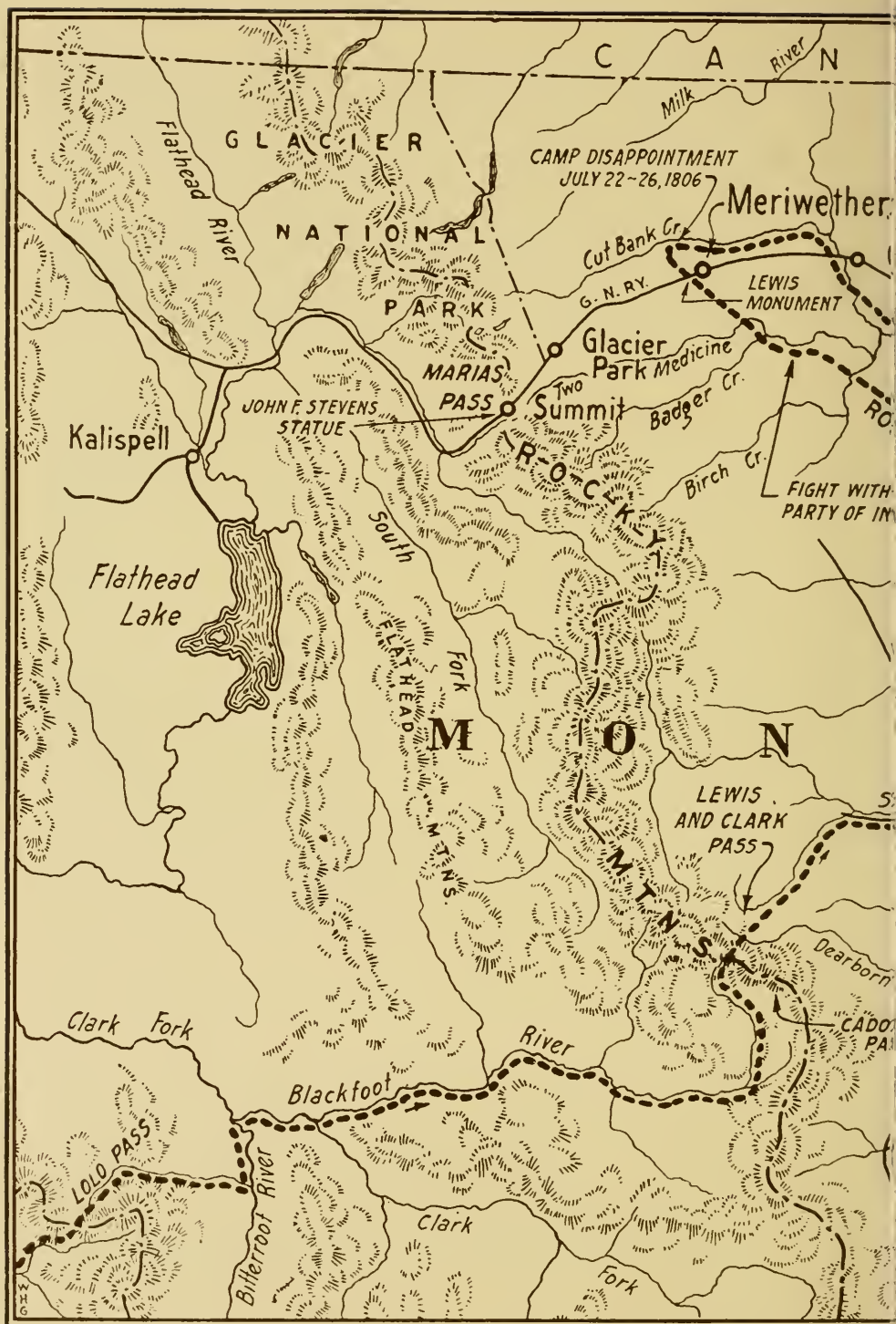
Sacajawea had already recognized the spot where the conflict between her people and the Minnetarees had taken place and where she had been made captive. They could not, she assured them, fail soon to encounter some band of Shoshones.

Across the Rockies

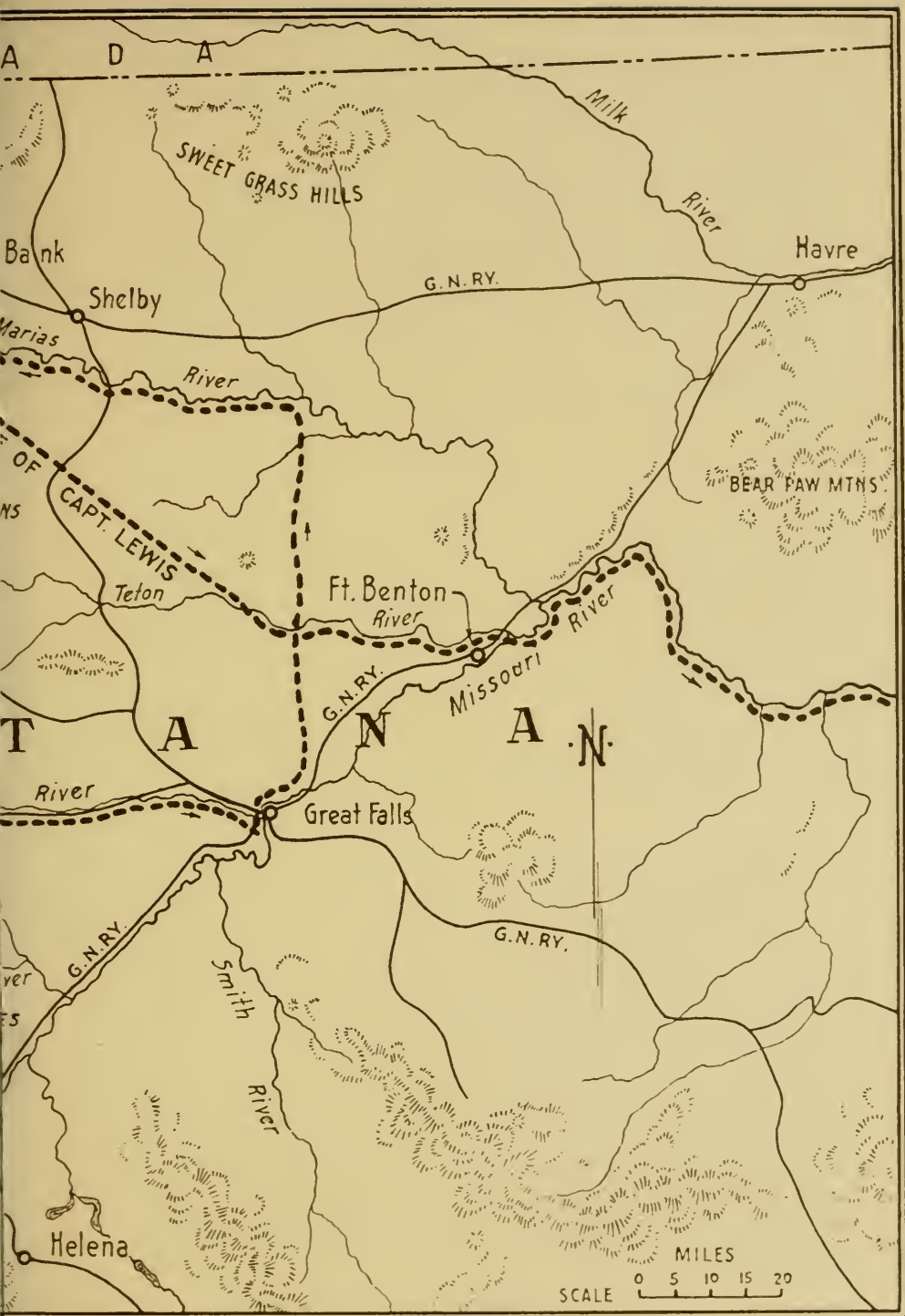
On August 12, the headwaters of the stream were reached which he joyfully believed to be the source of the Missouri. Following an Indian road they soon came upon westward-flowing water—the source of the Lemhi River. They had surmounted the Continental Divide and before them flowed a tributary of the fabled Columbia! But the triumph of this great moment was heavily overshadowed with anxiety. With scanty provisions and no guides their condition would be all but desperate.

At last Lewis came upon a band of Shoshones and persuaded them to return with him to meet the main body still advancing up the Missouri under Captain Clark. The meeting of the two parties was marked by a most romantic incident. At sight of the Indians the interpreter's wife, Sacajawea who, burdened as she was with a young child, had shared helpfully and without complaint the painful marches, privations, and difficulties of the long journey, manifested extravagant joy. Laughing, weeping, sucking her fingers to indicate that these people were her own relatives, she rushed to embrace them and was received with equal delight. In the person of the chief she later discovered her own brother. Sacajawea's services as interpreter were invaluable and this incident was also of great importance in strengthening the friendly relations established with the Shoshones. Her character and conduct offer a singular contrast to that of her white husband Chaboneau, who was always tired, always afraid and like most cowards, a bully as well. "I checked" Captain Clark writes on August 14 [1805] "our interpreter for striking his woman at their dinner."

They travelled for almost a month through wild and difficult mountain country and at last crossed the main range of the



Map Showing Route of Captain Lewis'



Bitter Root from the headwaters of a tributary of the Bitter Root River called by them Traveller's Rest Creek and now known as the Lo Lo fork, to those of the Kooskooskie or Clearwater, a branch of the Snake River.

Late in September they reached a Nez Percé village on the Clearwater from which place they were to proceed by water. The work of building canoes was now undertaken. By the first week in October, the party was ready to go forward. The horses were intrusted to a Nez Percé chief who promised to guard them until the return of the explorers the following spring.

They descended the Clearwater to the Snake or Lewis River, and from there passed into and down the Columbia.

The Goal Reached

The long westward journey of over eighteen months was drawing to a close. On November 2, the canoes felt the deep swell of tide water pushing up stream. We can imagine with what new courage the boatmen sped their frail and battered craft! The morning of the 7th came veiled in rain and fog, but as the day advanced the rain stopped, the curtain of fog lifted and before them lay the mighty Pacific.

"Great joy in camp" Captain Clark writes, "we are in *view* of the *Ocian*, this great Pacific Octian, which we have been so long anxious to see, and the roeing or noise made by the waves, brakeing on the rocky shores . . . may be heard distictly . . . O! the joy."

There was not much cause for joy however in the dreary months that followed. They lived like amphibian creatures in an incessant downpour of rain; their houses dripped at every crack; they slept, cooked, hunted, and explored in a bleak deluge. The trading vessels on which they had counted to renew their supplies had all left these waters. The health of the men suffered severely from lack of proper shelter, clothing and food. The Indians, inferior to any they had known, were troublesome and demanded exorbitant prices for all they had to sell.

Early in December permanent winter quarters were established near the mouth of the Lewis and Clark River, not far from the present town of Astoria. Here Fort Clatsop—a cluster of huts surrounded by a stockade—was built and the remainder of the winter spent by the leaders in work on their journals and various scientific examinations and reports.

The Return

On March 26, 1806, they set out on the long homeward journey lacking in almost every necessity but that gallant spirit with which each member of the party was so plentifully endowed. The first part of their route, except for a short cut from the mouth of the Lewis or Snake River to its junction with the Clearwater was the same that had been taken on the westward journey. On the Clearwater they found the Nez Percé chief to whom they had entrusted their horses. These were delivered to them together with a plentiful supply of food for which this admirable Indian indignantly refused any payment. Most of this time the explorers, being almost without trade goods, bought the services of the Indians by administering medical treatment. For this the scrupulous Captain Lewis rather apologizes, observing however, that they were careful to prescribe none but *harmless* remedies!

When they reached the Bitter Root valley the two leaders separated—each to proceed by a different way to the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Missouri Rivers where they were to meet.

Captain Clark turned southeastward. When his party reached the Three Forks of the Missouri, a number of men under Sergeant Ordway descended this river to the mouth of the Maria's where they were to await Captain Lewis, while Captain Clark was to go on across country to the headwaters of the Yellowstone and proceed thence by canoe.

Maria's River Expedition

Lewis' expedition, which has received less attention than other parts of the exploration, we shall follow in some detail. On July 3, this leader, with nine men and five Indians (the Indians remained with them only one day) left the camp on the Bitter Root. They proceeded in a northeasterly direction, crossed the Continental Divide by what has since been known as the Lewis and Clark Pass, and reached the Missouri in the vicinity of the Great Falls. Leaving a small party of men and four horses to await Sergeant Ordway, Captain Lewis with only three men set out on what was to be the most dangerous and nearly fatal of all their adventures.

When Lewis had investigated the Maria's river the previous summer, he had believed it to be one of the most important



Lewis Monument, Meriwether, Mont.

tributaries of the Missouri and one which was likely to be of importance in determining the international boundary. He decided therefore to ascertain how far north it had its source. It seems probable that he also wished to discover whether there were not passes in this northern latitude more favorable than those by which they had crossed the mountains farther south.

The party left the Great Falls July 17, 1806. Their course lay over a vast plain, empty of tree and shrub on which roving herds of buffalo peacefully grazed.

After traveling twenty miles they reached a river (the Teton) called by them the Tansy. Here they came upon the track of a bleeding buffalo which they took as an indication that Indians were in the vicinity. They were now in a country frequented by the Minnetarees of Fort de Prairie—one of the two distinct tribes to which the name Gros Ventres was also applied*—and by the Blackfeet. Lewis had been told that these were Indians of a far more dangerous temper than those formerly encountered, in spite of which he does not seem to have had the slightest hesitancy in proceeding with his slender escort, deep into their territory.

Hoping now, he writes, to avoid an interview with them, the party hurried into a small wood across the Teton River. From this shelter, however, they seem promptly to have emerged and set out separately in search of the buffalo and further Indian signs. Neither were discovered and the night passed tranquilly.

The next day they struck a small tributary of the Maria's which they called Buffalo creek and which they descended, passing countless herds of buffalo. After traveling twelve miles they cut across overland to Maria's river.

Lewis found that he was above the highest place on that river he had reached on the former journey, and sent a party down stream to make sure that no important tributary came in between these two points.

The remainder of that day and the whole of the next they continued up the Maria's. The 21st they reached the forks of the river, the southern branch now being known as the Two Medicine, and the northern as the Cut Bank; crossing the present line of the Great Northern Railway near the station of Cut Bank they proceeded up the latter fork, their course being north of

Note: *—These Minnetarees were a branch of the Arapahoes, a separate racial stock from the Hidatsa, or Minnetarees found near the Mandan villages.

and generally parallel with the Great Northern Railway for twenty miles. The following afternoon they reached a point about ten miles, Lewis writes, from the foot of the Rockies (it was in reality 25 miles from Glacier Park where the prairie touches the rugged mountain slope). Here the river bent to the southwest, and he realized that the Maria's did not attain so high a latitude as he expected. They made camp here, on the south side of the Cut Bank River, and proposed to remain two days for the purpose of taking observations and examining the surrounding region.

This was the most northerly point reached by the Lewis and Clark expedition. It is about six or seven miles northwest of the Great Northern and at the nearest point on the railway (about two miles west of the present station of Meriwether) a sandstone shaft has been erected which bears the following inscription:

JULY 26, 1806
FARTHEST POINT WEST
ON CAPT. LEWIS' TRIP
UP THE
MARIAS RIVER

To the southwest they might almost have seen Maria's Pass, which, had they ascended Maria's river instead of the Missouri on their outward journey, might have taken them across the mountains by a far easier way than the one they followed.

Lewis' first care was to send a man forward to examine the river "till its entrance to the mountains." Although they prolonged their stay at this place several days, the desired astronomical observations could not be taken; the weather remained overcast and the captain's chronometer stopped for several hours. Game was scarce and the party suffered from hunger and cold. They left on the morning of July 26th, naming the place Camp Disappointment.

Encounter with Minnetarees

Their course lay southeastward across the plains. The party crossed Willow Creek about two miles from camp and soon crossed the present line of the Great Northern Railway two miles west of the station Meriwether near the place where the monument above referred to now stands; a twelve-mile ride

brought them to the Two Medicine or South fork of the Maria's. They forded this river and a few miles farther reached a small tributary known as Badger Creek, on which many years afterwards a trading post and the Blackfoot agency were situated. Crossing Badger Creek at its mouth they continued down the south side of the Two Medicine for three miles. One of the hunters, Drewyer, advanced along the valley on the opposite side.

Captain Lewis with the remaining two men ascended the high land beside the river. They soon caught sight of about thirty horses grazing on the plains. With the aid of his glass Lewis now made a most unpleasant discovery. Eight of the horses were saddled and he had not far to look for their riders. On a hilltop, gazing down into the valley, probably at Drewyer, he beheld for the first time since entering the territory of the plains Indians whom he refers to as "vicious and profligate rovers", a group of savages.

He carefully weighed the situation which seemed to him serious. He did not know how numerous this band might prove to be; he had every reason to fear that their disposition would be hostile. The horses of his party were slow and could easily be overtaken; it was moreover out of the question to abandon Drewyer, whom the Indians had already seen. He decided therefore to advance in "friendly fashion" under the problematic protection of the American flag.

On perceiving them the Indians were thrown into great confusion, but at last mounted and rode to meet the Americans. When the two parties were within a hundred yards of each other the savages halted and one of them came on alone. Captain Lewis therefore stopped his men and went forward to meet him. They shook hands, after which the others advanced and greeted each other with the same show of good feeling, the Indians indicating that they wished to smoke with the white men. Captain Lewis gave them to understand that the man they had first seen going down the river had the pipe and asked that an Indian go with one of his party to bring Drewyer back.

He learned by signs that they were, as he had feared, Minnetarees of the North and inquired if there were chiefs among them. They indicated three of their number to whom, although Lewis did not believe them to be chiefs, he offered gifts—a flag to one, a medal to one, and a handkerchief to the third. He felt

somewhat reassured in finding there were but eight of the savages, believing his men could easily hold their own with that number.

Lewis now proposed that the parties camp together for the night. Accordingly they descended to the river bank where the Indians put up a leather lodge and the evening was spent in talk and smoking. They learned that these Indians were part of a large band which was camped on the Two Medicine branch of the Maria's, near the Rocky Mountains, and that another party was hunting about the Broken Mountains [Sweet-grass Hills].

Lewis recounted to them his long journey, said that he hoped to persuade the Minnetarees to live on more peaceful terms with other tribes and to bring their furs to the future trading posts which were to be established at the mouth of the Maria's. He told them that the rest of his party was waiting for him there and suggested that some of the Indians proceed to their main encampment and invite all of the band to meet him at that place, while the rest should go there with him. It was arranged among the white men that a watch be kept during the night. I shall quote Elliott Coues in his "History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition":

"Sunday, July 27th. At sunrise, the Indians got up and crowded around the fire near which J. Fields, who was then on watch, had carelessly left his rifle, near the head of his brother, who was still asleep. One of the Indians slipped behind him, and, unperceived, took his brother's and his own rifle, while at the same time two others seized those of Drewyer and Captain Lewis. As soon as Fields turned, he saw the Indian running off with the rifles; instantly calling his brother, they pursued him for 50 or 60 yards; just as they overtook him, in the scuffle for the rifles R. Fields stabbed him through the heart with his knife. The Indian ran about fifteen steps and fell dead. They now ran back with their rifles to the camp. The moment the fellow touched his gun, Drewyer, who was awake, jumped up and wrested it from him. The noise awoke Captain Lewis, who instantly started from the ground and reached for his gun; but finding it gone, drew a pistol from his belt, and turning saw the Indian running off with it. He followed him and ordered him to lay it down, which he did just as the two Fields came up, and were taking aim to shoot him; when Captain Lewis ordered them not to fire, as the Indian did not appear to intend any mischief. He dropped the gun and was going slowly off when Drewyer came out and asked permission to kill him; but this Captain Lewis forbade, as he had not yet attempted to shoot us. But finding that the Indians were now endeavoring to drive off all the horses, he ordered [all] three of us to follow the main party, who were chasing the horses up the river, and fire instantly upon the thieves; while he, without taking time to run for his shot-pouch, pursued the fellow who had stolen his gun and another Indian, who were driving away the horses on the left of the



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Confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers

camp. He pressed them so closely that they left twelve of their horses, but continued to drive off one of our own. At the distance of 300 paces they entered a steep niche in the river-bluffs, when Captain Lewis, being too much out of breath to pursue them any further, called out, as he had done several times before, that unless they gave up the horse he would shoot them. As he raised his gun one of the Indians jumped behind a rock and spoke to the other, who stopped at the distance of thirty paces. Captain Lewis shot him in the belly. He fell on his knees and right elbow; but raising himself a little, fired and then crawled behind a rock. The shot had nearly been fatal, for Captain Lewis, who was bareheaded, felt the wind of the ball very distinctly. Not having his shot-pouch, he could not reload his rifle; and having only a single load for his pistol, he thought it most prudent not to attack the Indians, and therefore retired slowly to the camp. He was met by Drewyer, who, hearing the report of guns, had come to his assistance, leaving the Fields to pursue the Indians. Captain Lewis ordered him to call out to them to desist from the pursuit, as we could take the horses of the Indians in place of our own; but they were at too great a distance to hear him. He therefore returned to the camp; and whilst he was saddling the horses, the Fields returned with four of our own, having followed the Indians until two of them swam the river and two others ascended the hills, so that the horses became dispersed.

"We, however, were rather gainers by the contest, for we took four of the Indian horses, and lost only one of our own. Besides which, we found in the camp four shields, two bows with quivers, and one of the guns, which we took with us, as also the flag which we had presented to the Indians, but left the medal round the neck of the dead man, in order that they might be informed who we were. The rest of their baggage, except some buffalo-meat, we left; and as there was no time to be lost, we mounted our horses, and after ascending the river-hills, took our course through the beautiful level plains, in a direction a little to the south of east. We had no doubt but that we should be immediately pursued by a much larger party, and that as soon as intelligence was given to the band near the Broken mountains, they would hasten to the mouth of Maria's river to intercept us. We hoped, however, to be there before them, so as to form a junction with our friends."*

Travelling as fast as their horses could carry them, they soon passed a stream which they called Battle River, now known as Birch creek, and later crossed the Teton, five miles above where they had passed it on the northward trip. Here they halted for a much needed rest of an hour and a half. They continued their journey until nightfall when, having killed a buffalo, they ventured to stop for another two hours. By the light of a cloudy moon, among limitless dark masses of buffalo they then continued their desperate race from this perilous vicinity. At two in the morning they stopped for a few hours' sleep, but at dawn, broken and sore from the hard riding of the previous day, were again in the saddle.

Captain Lewis was as deeply concerned for the safety of the party at the mouth of the Maria's as for himself and his three

men. He felt sure that the main body of the Minnetarees, on learning what had occurred, would proceed to that point and attack the men waiting with the canoes. He announced his intention of advancing by the most direct and most dangerous route to the confluence of the rivers. If, before reaching there, the enemy overtook them they were to make a stand until—as, with his fine courage and hopefulness he suggests—they routed the Indians; or were killed.

As they approached the river they heard the sound of rifles and hurrying to the bank “saw, with exquisite satisfaction our friends coming down the river”.

It was Sergeant Ordway with the party which had separated from Captain Clark at the Three Forks of the Missouri.

At the mouth of the Maria's, by great good fortune, they met the men Captain Lewis had left above the falls and who had descended to this point by land bringing the horses.

Down the Missouri

On the 29th the whole party set out by canoe down the river. The water was high and the current strong and they were soon swept safely out of reach of the Minnetarees.

It rained at first in torrents; buffalo continued in immense numbers; elk, many big horn, antelope, deer, and wolves were seen and the hunters brought in a varied supply of meat.

The progress of the party was rapid and without serious incident and on August 7, 1806, they reached the mouth of the Yellowstone. Here they found the fragment of a letter left by Captain Clark saying that he had continued down the Missouri. Captain Lewis accordingly went forward.

On the 12th of August they met two traders from Illinois, the first white men outside of their own party they had seen since leaving the Mandan villages in March, 1805, and on that same day they overtook Captain Clark.

On August 14 the united party reached the Minnetaree and Mandan villages where they had spent the winter of 1804-05 and where they were now cordially received. They tried to induce chiefs of both nations to accompany them to St. Louis and go from there to Washington to visit the President. A Mandan chief was finally persuaded, together with his wife and son, to accept the invitation. At this place Chaboneau asked for

his discharge and, with his wife Sacajawea and their much traveled infant remained among the Mandans.

As the party proceeded down the river the most striking feature of their journey was the frequency with which they met parties from St. Louis ascending to the Indian country to trade. These were the pioneers of that great traffic in furs which was to be the important commerce of the frontier for fifty years and in them Lewis and Clark beheld the first result of their own achievement. Ever widening circles of activity were to follow that achievement until Jefferson's dream of a continent redeemed from savagery, the home of an American people freed from the rule so abhorred by him of King and Church, became a reality.

In spite of the generally sober language of the journals we find a growing undercurrent of excitement and joy at this return to civilization after two years and three months of such isolation, toil, danger, and privation as they had undergone.

On September 20, they reached the French village of La Charette which they saluted with cheers and a discharge of four guns, and where they were welcomed doubtless with astonishment, it being the popular belief that they had perished in the wilderness. The next day they were again on their way. New settlements had sprung up and they were "refreshed with the sight of men and cattle" along the banks. St. Charles was reached on the 21st and wildest excitement greeted their arrival. Detained by the hospitalities extended them they did not set out until ten o'clock of the following day.

Word of their coming preceded them and men, women and children flocked to the shore, the river rang with cheers as the small flotilla swept past with its bronzed and tattered crew.

On the 23rd of September they entered the Mississippi and at noon fired their salute before the village of St. Louis.

Their task was accomplished. They had navigated the Missouri River from its mouth to one of its sources in the heart of the Rocky mountains; had crossed that range to the western slope of the continent; found their way to the Columbia and down its waters to the Pacific Ocean. On their return they discovered new mountain passes and widened the scope of their exploration by separate expeditions. The various operations of the party covered over 6,000 miles in a primeval world which afforded no aid or succor but that which they themselves could

wrest from its hard grasp. When they entered it the calendar turned back thousands of years and took them to an age the story of which is written only in geologic strata.

At all times even in moments of most desperate need or peril they did not fail carefully to observe birds, plants, animals and topographical features and record them in their copious reports. The maps they drew are accurate and complete and served for many years as guides to those who followed them into these wild regions. Of the aboriginal peoples they encountered, many had never before seen a white man; the courage with which they were met and the fairness with which they were treated won from them often friendship, always respect. If all the white men who came in early contact with the Indians had been of the quality of Lewis and Clark the story of Indians and whites in the north-west would have been a very different one.

This was the first official exploring expedition sent out by the American government. Its significance in our national development cannot be overemphasized; where Lewis and Clark led, the population of an empire has followed.

When the reader puts down their journals, admiration for their extraordinary efficiency is mingled with a feeling of something like personal affection for the thoughtful, generous Lewis, the unlettered and indomitable Clark—brave and simple men, of whom the nation may justly be proud.









